

Ely Stefansky Ratner, of Massachusetts, to be an Assistant Secretary of Defense; Shawn Graham Skelly, of Virginia, to be an Assistant Secretary of Defense; Meredith Berger, of Florida, to be an Assistant Secretary of the Navy; Gina Maria Ortiz Jones, of Texas, to be Under Secretary of the Air Force; and Caroline Diane Krass, of the District of Columbia, to be General Counsel of the Department of Defense.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ELECTIONS

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I will get right to the point: the very definition of democracy in the United States is under attack. You see it in State legislatures across the country. Powerful partisans advancing bill after bill to restrict voters' access to the ballot box. It flies in the face of the very evolution of progress.

Gone are the days when voters rode on horseback or walked for miles to cast their ballot. Technological advances, commonsense understandings of the daily lives of hard-working Americans—all these things and more recommend an open, accessible, expanded, and secure election process. Yet instead of seizing these opportunities to ensure every voice, every vote counts, partisan efforts are afoot to take us back—back to a time when senseless barriers were erected to block the votes of very specific communities.

The U.S. Senate—the democratically elected U.S. Senate—should not stand for such an assault on our democracy. And every Senator who swears the oath of office should stand up and stand against this bitter attack on the ballot box.

Protecting the right to vote has long been bipartisan. I stood alongside my dear friend, himself a soldier in the war against voter oppression, John Lewis, when we reauthorized the Voting Rights Act in 2006. And it was with a heavy—but hopeful—heart that I reintroduced the Voting Rights Advancement Act last year to bear his name. I will soon do so again. This bipartisan legislation should advance, and quickly.

Now is the time for every American—regardless of party, regardless of politics—to stand in defense of our democracy. To stand for what is right, and to stand with the clear arc of history—the arc that bends toward justice, toward inclusion, towards equality. With one loud and clear voice, we should reject erosions of voter protections. And we should do so now.

Vermont has always been at the forefront of expanding access to the ballot, and one of our State's leaders in that fight has been Secretary of State Jim Condos. I ask unanimous consent that a column by Secretary Condos, published in the July 14 edition of The Times Argus, be printed in the RECORD. There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Times Argus, July 14, 2021]

OUR DEMOCRACY IS AT A CROSSROADS

(By Jim Condos)

“The vote is precious. It is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democratic society, and we must use it”—John Lewis

This month we celebrated the birth of our nation.

Since its inception, American democracy has undergone continual transformation. During the past 245 years, many activists and advocates have fought tirelessly to expand the franchise that our democratic ideals depend on: the right to vote.

From suffragettes to civil rights leaders, their work has ensured that the march of progress has been oriented forward, focused on increasing access to the ballot box.

This Independence Day was an opportunity to reflect on the resiliency of our country and of our democracy. There has been no shortage of challenges during the past year and a half. Despite these challenges, we achieved record breaking turnout for a general election, which nonpartisan experts have described as the most secure and the most scrutinized election in U.S. history. We were able to do so with common-sense voting reforms, providing voters with more options for receiving and casting their ballot.

After the ballot counting was completed, and the careful town by town certification process took place, we had official results and a list of election winners and losers, just like every other general election in memory.

Unlike other election years, what has followed has brought our democracy to a crossroads. Without producing any evidence, the former president and his allies have used known false voter-fraud claims as justification for their attempts to use state legislatures and phony ‘fraudits’ to supersede the will of the people and, more significantly, to restrict access to the ballot box.

Our democratic principles should have to endure constant debate. However, willfully disregarding the certified, official election results in an effort to circumvent the will of the people and prevent the peaceful transition of power sets our country on a dangerous path.

Sending us even further into treacherous territory, some state legislatures are using ‘the Big Lie’ to roll back the voter access expansions made during 2020, and to further suppress voting rights through measures such as the implementation of more restrictive voter ID laws, limits on the ballot-by-mail request period, elimination or reduction in ballot drop boxes, and closure of polling precincts.

After record-breaking turnout in 2020, and with zero evidence of widespread fraud or election rigging, why would they want to make it harder for eligible Americans to vote? The answer is simple: because they were unhappy with the results and want fewer people to vote.

Overall, there have been over 350 bills introduced in 47 states with the sole purpose of reducing access to the ballot. In June alone, 17 state legislatures enacted 28 new voter restriction laws. A small few include reasonable, understandable reforms.

Most make no sense at all. It is clear that some lawmakers would prefer to pick their voters, rather than voters picking their representatives.

Frankly, I am concerned for our nation. We stand at a crossroads, and the decisions we make now will ripple throughout time.

There is hope. In Vermont, we saw the record turnout as a positive, so we made the mailing of ballots to all voters a permanent fixture of Vermont general elections. We also created a new pathway for voters to correct a defective ballot so that their vote will count. We did this by working across the aisles with the support of Democrats, Republicans, Progressives and independents.

In the face of the alarming rise in state-level attacks on voting rights, we cannot afford to wait for solutions one-by-one in all 50 states. With the gutting of the Voting Rights Act by the Supreme Court, we no longer have the luxury of a ‘wait and see’ approach. Congress can, and must, create minimum voter access and fairness standards that states must abide by, so that eligible voters are not being denied their voting rights.

The true voter fraud in this country is denying any eligible American their right to register and vote.

Congress alone can put an end to restrictive and unnecessary obstacles to voting, prohibit racebased and partisan gerrymandering, make automatic, online and same day voter registration the law of the land, and make voting by mail accessible for every voter, regardless of which side of an invisible line you live on.

Two federal bills pending, the For the People Act, and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, give Congress this opportunity to act. The time has come for the partisan, political games to stop. Those who are prioritizing the promotion of politically motivated falsehoods about the security of our elections, over the voting rights of the people who put them in office, are committing a severe dereliction of duty.

In 2021, our democracy has come to a crossroads. Fortunately, we have a roadmap, we just need to follow it.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, since the start of the pandemic, the State of Vermont, at every level of its leadership, has taken heroic efforts to mitigate spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus. With strong leadership from Gov. Phil Scott, and bolstered by a firm belief in scientific facts, the State nearly halted altogether the spread of COVID-19, minimized the number of Vermonters lost to the disease, and now leads the Nation in the percentage of residents who have received at least one vaccine shot. As we look to hopefully soon be on the other side of this pandemic, I strongly believe that there are invaluable lessons to be learned from Vermont's response, so that we are better prepared for the days, months, and years ahead.

Aisha K. Jha's ‘Vermont's and South Dakota's COVID Infection Rates are Remarkably Similar—But their Outcomes are Not’ article published in the Washington Post on July 13, 2021, reviews the important steps Vermont took to not only protect the health of its residents but also ensure that minimal economic damage was done given